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ABSTRACT

One of the six national goals in the United States is to achieve a 90 percent graduation rate by the year 2000. In the last 50 years, high school graduation has become the norm. Concurrent with the new expectation of high school graduation came the dominance of the word "dropout" to describe those without diplomas. Many Americans view dropping out as dangerous for the individual as well as for society. Dropping out as a definition of a social problem, a reflection of expectations, and the target of social policies is the subject of this book. It begins with a brief summary of graduation experiences since 1940 and the changing role of high schools. The core of the book covers the early 1960s, when the phrase "dropout" emerged to become the dominant term describing those who leave school before receiving a diploma. The stereotype of high school dropouts that coalesced in the 1960s said much about how educators and social critics saw juvenile delinquency, labor markets, and gender roles. Dropouts continue to be spoken of as a social problem, and the language of dropping out reflects a deep ambiguity about the purposes of schools and the inability of schools both to socialize everyone and to act as meritocratic judges of ability and worth. The book argues that instead of seeing different educational outcomes as evidence of remaining inequities in schooling, Americans have focused instead on the social costs of dropping out, typically imagined as dependency, criminality, and lower economic productivity. Through use of this language, the social construction of dropping out has given high schools the burden of ameliorating poverty and preventing social chaos. However, schooling cannot solve the real problems that poor people face. Five tables are included. (Contains 438 references.) (LMI)

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